

Natural History.

CURIOUS FACT IN NATURAL HISTORY.

BY C. F. HOLDEN.

Our illustration represents the American iguana crossing a river, the Chagres, as wide as the Harlem at High Bridge, upon the surface of the water, without sinking below it. This wonderful performance was witnessed by Mr. John G. Bell, the well-known naturalist and former companion of Audubon. Mr. Bell states that as he was approaching the river he came suddenly upon the reptile, and alarmed it so that it sprang into the river, but instead of sinking, to his surprise, it rushed along over the water, making its claws go like lightning, so that he could not see them, and thus keeping the whole body above the water. It made quite a foam behind, and in about two minutes was over the river, up the bank and out of sight. When it is remembered that this animal weighs from five to ten pounds, and has slender claws fitted for tree-climbing, the wonderful character of the performance will be appreciated. It is from four to five feet long, and its general color is green shaded with brown. It has a strong and distinct crest running along the whole length of the back and tail, and a large dewlap or pouch under the throat, the edge of which is attached to a cartilaginous appendage of the bone and throat. The tail is very long, slender, compressed, and covered with small, imbricated, keeled scales. It has a very formidable look at first sight, and when irritated it puts on a very menacing appearance, swelling out its throat pouch, erecting the crest on its back, and lashing its tail about with great violence. It is, nevertheless, a harmless creature, unless laid hold of, when it bites with considerable force. Altogether the occurrence is a most remarkable one and entirely antagonistic to the supposed habits of the animal.

THE GECKO, OR WALL LIZARD.

Gecko is a name applied to a family of nocturnal lizards, numerous in species, found in all the warm regions of the globe. The name is said to be given them from the slight guttural cry which they make when pursuing their prey. In broad day they seem to be blinded by the rays of the sun, and repose half asleep, but when evening comes they regain all their agility.

Their appearance is quite repulsive; their bodies are flat, covered with a flabby skin, head large and flattened, a huge mouth armed with fine sharp teeth, their tongues short and fleshy, large eyes at the sides of the head, which are covered with transparent eyelids, the pupils narrow and vertical, like the cat and owl.

Considered as an impure animal by the Hebrews, the gecko is, in the extreme East, the object of great terror, and it is looked upon as impregnated with the most subtle poison. The ancient authors believed that the saliva of these animals was made use of to poison arrows. Bontius says that their bite is deadly, and another author relates that he saw at Cairo three ladies in great danger of death from having eaten some food upon which a gecko had stepped.

Although this animal is an object of repulsion and fear to the common people it appears to be absolutely inoffensive. M. Sauvage says, in *La Nature*, that he has often handled, without precaution, the different species of geckos, even the gecko of Egypt, so feared that it is named Abou-burz, or "father of leprosy," from the belief that it communicates that terrible disease to persons who partake of food with which it comes in contact.

Geckos are useful to man, as they feed upon insects, caterpillars and flies, which they entrap by placing themselves in ambush. They are often found in considerable numbers within doors, concealing themselves upon the roofs or crawling about upon the walls and ceilings. Their toes have, for the most part, a leaf-like expansion which enables them to walk even upon polished perpendicular surfaces, and they run noiselessly and with great rapidity in all directions. Their hooked claws, sometimes retractile like those of the cat, assist them to climb nimbly along the walls, where they hunt their prey from stone to stone, or by entering small crevices in the rocks into which their flat flexible bodies are able to penetrate.

Some geckos, as the platydactylus, have their toes widened the whole length, while the hemidactylus are expanded only at base, and the phyllodactylus at the extremity of the toes.

These last, formerly supposed to inhabit only New Guinea, Australia, and Chili, have been found in Europe and are known as the European phyllodactylus. They were believed to be pecu-

liar to Sardinia, but have lately been found by M. Lataste in the Island of Pendus in the Gulf of Marseilles.

The common platydactylus, which is found in Southern France, Italy and Spain, was known to the ancients, who probably called it a lizard, and thought that its venom neutralized the poison of the scorpion. The bite of this animal, which was dangerous or even deadly in Greece, was, according to Pliny, almost inoffensive in Sicily. The same author says that the skin macerated in vinegar or reduced to ashes was a sovereign remedy in some diseases. In this species the body is often of a gray color, while the lower parts are whitish, but sometimes it is of a bronzed brown, with gray bands across the back and tail; the head, although flat is thickened at the back, the neck being distinct from the body; the skin which envelops it is transversely folded. The upper part of the skull is covered with small convex plates, the oval tubercles are strongly defined and are surrounded by other smaller tubercles with fine granulated scales, protecting the back. The upper part of the tail is provided with spines.

The geographical distribution of the hemidactylus is the same as that of the species just described. The head is short, the nose very blunt, the surface of the skull slightly convex. The toes are all provided with claw, and are not united by a membrane. From the nape of the neck to the beginning of the tail the tubercles, like small nails, are arranged in longitudinal rows nearly approaching one another. The general color of the head is gray, sometimes reddish with brown marbling.

DESCENT OF MAN.

Two French savants have for the last twelve months been keeping nine pigs in a state of habitual drunkenness, with a view to testing the effects of different kinds of alcohol liquors; the Prefect of the Seine having kindly put some sties in the yard of the municipal slaughter-houses at the disposal of the savants, in order that they might conduct their interesting experiment at the smallest cost to themselves. Pigs were chosen for the experiment because of the close resemblance of their digestive apparatus to that of man. The pig who takes absinthe is first gay, then excitable, irritable, combative, and finally drowsy; the pig who has brandy mixed with his food is cheerful all through till he falls to sleep; the rum swilling pig becomes sad and somnolent almost at once; while the pig who takes gin conducts himself in eccentric ways,—grunting, squealing, tilting his head against the sty door, and rising on his hind legs as if to sniff the wind. Dr. Decaisne, describing these experiments with intoxicated swine, remarks in the *France* that they are none the worse for their year's tipping.

These experiments, taken in conjunction with the pig's well-known personal peculiarities in feeding and his obstinate refusal travel the correct path, go far to show that man was not evolved from the monkey, as some have surmised.—*Scientific American*.

Domestic Hints.

HOW TO COOK SALSIFY.

Some of our correspondents say that they have followed our advice to grow Salsify—or Oyster Plant as it is often called—and that we should now tell them what to do with it. To those unacquainted with the plant we may say that it is perfectly hardy, and if any has been left in the ground, it will be just as good in the spring, or if dug during a thaw. The roots, whether of Salsify, or of Scorzonera, often called Black Salsify—have a milky juice, which, when exposed to the air, soon becomes brown. In preparing them they should be quickly scraped, to remove the skin, and at once dropped into water to prevent discoloration. In the following recipes it is presumed that the root has been thus prepared.

Stewed Salsify.—Cut the root into convenient bits and throw them at once into water enough to cover them. Add salt and stew gently until quite tender, pour off the water, add sufficient milk to cover, a good lump of butter, into which enough flour to thicken has been rubbed, season with pepper. When the butter has melted, and the milk boils, and has sufficiently thickened, serve.

Salsify Soup, is essentially the same as the foregoing, only adding a large quantity of milk to form a soup, and omitting the thickening. To increase the resemblance to oyster soup some add a little salt codfish picked fine.